

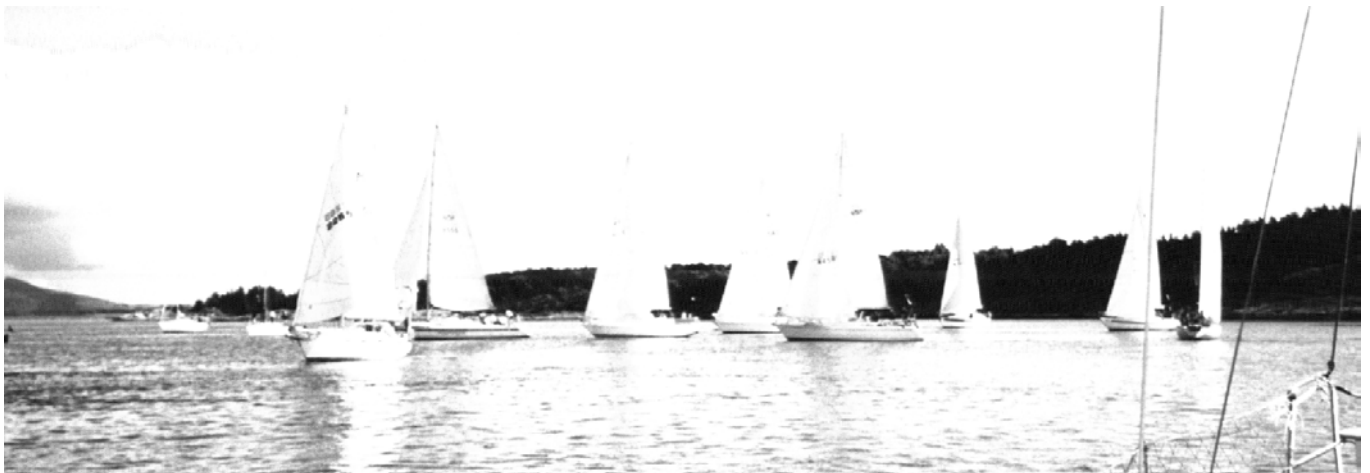
Racing Across the North Sea in Lovinda, July 1999

10 am Friday 2nd July 1999 and with mounting excitement we cast off our lines along with 30 other yachts and motored out of the picturesque harbour of Stavanger into Byfjorden to the start line of the Halliburton North Sea Yacht Race. We were setting off to the start in Lovinda, a Norwegian Willing 31, more a cruising yacht than a racer, but with good pedigree winning the local Wednesday evening club races, as doing well in previous North Sea races.

We had already enjoyed a couple of days preparing the boat, checking out the opposition and studying the forecasts. I also spent some time with the other Scottish crews exploring the historic town of Stavanger with its colourful traditional wooden houses and markets as well as the countryside and dramatic fjords. However, the serious business started at the pre-race party when each skipper introduced their crews, some of whom had taken part in almost all of the 16 previous races. On Lovinda, we were a crew of 6: Svein (skipper) & Irene, myself, Christian, Hans Olav and Dag Terje. Two years ago we had come fourth overall in strong winds, this time with light winds forecast, the challenge was to do even better!



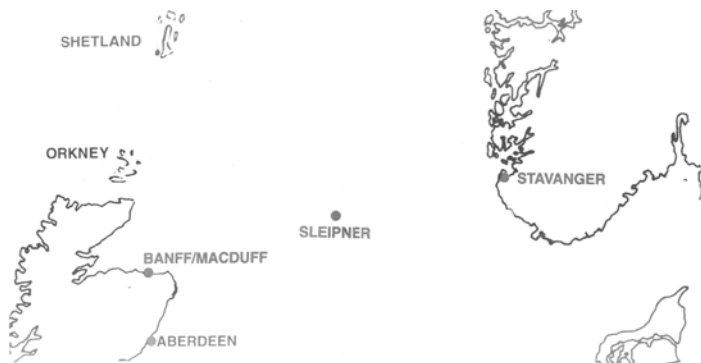
The start line was set off sponsor Halliburton's quayside offices on the south side of Byfjorden. Last year's race winner and race record holder (a crossing time of 30 hours and 44 minutes) Skaarungen, a Wasa Atlantic 50 footer from Stord, was already checking the line next to race favourite Virginia, a Stavanger based Bashford 36. As the seconds ticked down, and in the light winds, we decided to keep clear of the big boys - with over 280 miles to go to the finish at Banff, Scotland, the last thing we wanted was to have to do penalty turns.



The first few miles were a tight fetch up Byfjorden in a light north-westerly. By keeping in clean air and to the north side, we managed to keep up well with the leaders, but as we approached Tungeness lighthouse, the big yachts were beginning to pull away. For the time being, we were trading tacks with two of the Scottish yachts, Time Off, skippered by Morton Park from Banff Sailing Club and Lady M, skippered by Charlie Robertson from Nairn Yacht Club. Local knowledge paid off and we rounded the lighthouse ahead 10 meters from the shore and were able to call out our goodbyes to friends who had followed the race up the coast.

After passing Tungeness lighthouse, the fleet turned south-west into Hasteinsfjorden an open stretch of water and could almost lay a direct course for Banff. To the north were the low lying Kvitsøya islands which needed a wide berth, although the main islands were conspicuous with many radio masts. As we began to clear the coast, the wind settled just west of north. We were able to set the reaching spinnaker and keep just above the lay line. The yacht settled into an easy rhythm in the force 3 and gentle swell coming in from the west. We enjoyed an evening meal together in the cockpit watching the line of spinnakers spread across the horizon, before splitting into our watches of 4 hours on, 4 hours off for the rest of the race.

The race has been held every year since 1984, except in 1988 when the race was cancelled out of respect for those involved in the Piper Alpha tragedy. It is run in alternate directions between Banff and Stavanger around the



beginning of July. The course is a direct line across the North Sea. Apart from a mandatory radio check in at the Sleipner platform, interpretation of the weather is the main tactical challenge. This year was no different. Unusually light winds were split by a slow moving front lying east-west along the direct race line. To the north were favourable but light winds aft the beam, to the south slightly stronger head winds. The front was forecast to drift slowly north during the next few days and so would probably have to be crossed at some stage. Our strategy was to stay north of the lay line until Sleipner and then re-evaluate after reporting in.

At this latitude and time of year, the sun only dips below the horizon for a few hours, but during the first night we were able to keep tabs on the competition and even managed to pass a few navigation lights before dawn. By the next morning though, the horizon was almost empty, just the occasional sea bird wheeling around wondering what we were up to. At noon, we were approaching Sleipner and Irene was glued to the radio set, listening out for yachts reporting in their position. We were a bit behind compared with other yachts in our class, but then they were further south than us. The front was not far away and as we approached Sleipner, the cloud base began to lower until Sleipner itself disappeared just after we had reported in. With the wind remaining constant at a force 3, but slowly coming round to the west, we took down the spinnaker and continued under genoa and full main. In the afternoon we sailed in our own little world in a powdery blue sea.



That night we passed through the main oil fields. Each platform was brilliantly lit and at times there were five or six on the horizon. By morning they were behind us and we were entering the outer Moray Firth, about 60 miles to go.



Unfortunately, dawn brought a dying wind and as our speed fell to almost a trickle through the glassy sea, our only relief from the frustration was first one dolphin, then a pair, then four, until the horizon seems filled with countless dolphins. They would come and play around the boat before chasing off in search of fish, only to turn and come back again at great speed. They stayed with us for 6 hours before slowly departing one by one.

Over the radio, we could hear some of the skippers talking about the lack of wind. Several decided enough was enough and retired to motor home. However, with two yachts in our class within sight we tried every

sail combination imaginable to catch the occasional zephyr until after 8 hours of being becalmed, the wind eventually filled in from the south.

Because of the light winds, we had to spend a third night at sea. We had decided to keep out from the Scottish coast to avoid stronger tides inshore and during the night the wind slowly swung to the east and brought a haar with it. As dawn arrived, we were approaching the coast a few miles east of the finish line. All hands were on deck and we gybed the spinnaker when we could hear gulls on the cliffs and swell breaking on the rocks. Worried that we might miss the finish line altogether, we followed a depth contour and glimpsed the cliffs from time to time about 200 to 300 meters away. Eventually, two yellow buoys marking the finish line appeared out of the murk and with a big

cheer after 69 hours and 57 minutes at sea we crossed the line. The next problem was finding Macduff harbour apparently only 300 m away!



A warm welcome awaited us in Macduff even though it was only 8 o'clock in the morning and once safely tied up alongside the other yachts, we celebrated with a bottle from the local distillery for our "anchor dram"!

After a good night's rest, we had a great party at the Prize-giving and ceilidh in Banff. We came 15th overall, but first our class, so that was good enough reason to celebrate.

The next morning with a slightly sore head, I waved goodbye to my Norwegian friends, but we are all looking forward to being on the start line for the return race on 1st July 2000.